Gabor Boritt: 'He considered it satisfying to stand on the corner and watch America about him.'

The

By Jay Hall

HE IS UNAWARE that he is speaking of two men at the same time.

"He was a good and decent man in times when it was difficult to be good and decent."

(Are you speaking now, sir, of Abraham Lincoln or of Poul Boritt?)

A trifle startled, he reflects. "I thought I was summarizing Lincoln in the fewest possible words. I had not thought of it that way before, but, yes, I suppose I was talking of them both in the same breath."

Poul Boritt . . .

He is a man who sold newspapers on the same street corner in Boston year after year.

He is also the father of Dr. Gabor S. Boritt, assistant professor of history at Memphis State University, whose scholarly pursuit of Abraham Lincoln could land him a Pulitzer Prize in Letters in this year's awards announcement next month.

The book, "Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream," recently came off the Memphis State University Press and immediately became a Pulitzer nomination.

A beguiling thing about it is not to be found in its pages. It is how the specter of Abraham Lincoln gently infiltrated the soul of a Hungarian lad who had scarcely heard of the American hero before Russian guns took aim upon him and loosed their terrible fire.

IT IS A November day in 1956 in Budapest, Hungary.

"We lived in a six-story apartment building on the top floor. The Russians came with tanks out front. They moved up this street and that, stopping at predesignated points earmarked for methodical destruction. Our building was the present target.

"Tanks parked in front and

Specter Of Abraham Lincoln

By Charles Nicholas

began firing, pointblank, into the apartment building. We had watched their progress up the street and all the residents of the building had fled to the basement. Hundreds, maybe thousands — my impression now is thousands — of Hungarians were in the basement. It was solidly filled with people seeking safety.

"The guns brought the upper building down onto and into the basement. There was panic.

"I still admire my dad; he was one of the few who remained cool. He pulled us (his family) under steel beams holding up the basement while the other people were milling about blindly, screaming, animal-like. We were spared most of the falling debris.

"I remember thinking: I am only 16; it is not possible to die if you are only 16 years old. It is still true, I think, that when you are 16, you don't believe you can die."

Boritt's father held a doctorate in economics and, among other things, had been a newspaperman and "in politics." Democracy was almost a sacred word for him, his son recalls, and he put much stock in its practice as well as its preaching. When the Hungarian Freedom Fighters rose up against Communist dictatorship in 1956, resulting in the infamous Russian invasion in which the shooting lasted about two weeks, the Boritt family was in the thick of it.

Dr. Boritt rides his bicycle a mile and a half each day, with help from his sons, Norse, 8, and Jakob, 3.

"I DID NOT fight or man a gun," says Gabor Boritt. " I was still a boy. I helped build barricades and I was active in the streets, taking part in demonstrations.

"You can understand that I had a teenager's outlook on things at the time. I thought of it, I guess, as a great excitement more than as something that could kill us all.

"But it was not mere adventure to the older, wiser heads among us, such as my father.

"There was something he did at the time that made me, I suppose, a bit resentful in my young way of looking at things, but looking back, I'm deeply proud of him for doing.

"He was the commander — a civilian with a gun — of the supply train from Vienna that brought in food and medicine. The public could not get oranges, among other things; trains would bring in oranges and other scarce things but they were reserved for special groups, like hospital patients. I was resentful that my dad would not snitch some oranges to bring home; I could share them with my friends and be kind of important, you see. But he felt it was an undemocratic thing to do and he never did."

When the shooting war stopped, the Boritt family had to break up.

"My dad told us, 'There is no future for us here. Go to an English-speaking country because

Continued

Lincoln

Continued

that is one of the few places where democracy works.'"

The oldest son, Adam, who, unlike Boritt, had suffered considerable physical abuse in the revolution against the Communists, was the first to leave for America. He is now a physician in San Francisco.

GABOR AND his older sister, Judith, were the next arrivals in New York. She is now a medical doctor in Boston.

Boritt's father and stepmother followed in early 1957 and settled in Boston.

All of the Boritts came to this country with virtually nothing. The MSU member of the clan, now 39 years old, says:

"I came without a dollar to my name. But we didn't need much then. There was a lot of sympathy for what had happened in Hungary and everybody, in places like Vienna as well as the United States, gave us a lot of help, just volunteered it wherever we went.

"I started washing dishes in the United States and went on from there to being a waiter and a cook and doing farm jobs in summer. I became awfully good at cleaning out a barn. I like horses and cows but I never got very fond of hogs, they don't smell so good.

"I was still odd-jobbing when I was working on my master's degree in 1963. But by then I was a cook, which paid reasonably well."

Meanwhile, he had ended up in South Dakota with a scholarship at Yankton College.

He went to South Dakota "for the best reason. When I came to the United States, I realized it was good. I realized what my father had been talking about when he talked about democracy. In New York, some people had told me, 'If you want to know the depth feeling of America, you should not stay in the East but go to the heart of the country.'

"I LOVED America immediately on arriving here, and I thought the people were real fine, and I wanted to learn all about the people. So, at Yankton, in my history studies, I set out to learn all I could about Abraham Lincoln, because I thought: Who is more American than Lincoln?"

It was the start of 15 years of work that led to his book now being considered for a Pulitzer Prize.

After getting his undergraduate degree at Yankton, Boritt obtained a master's at the University of South Dakota and a PhD from Boston University. He married Elizabeth, a Yankee girl, in 1968 and they went to Japan for two years on a University of Maryland project of teaching American military personnel abroad.

During that time, Boritt twice voluntarily spent vacation periods in Vietnam teaching college-level American GIs and Vietnam civilians while warfare more than once disrupted the classroom near Da Nang.

"I volunteered because I wanted to do something for America which had done so much for me," Boritt says. "As a teacher, I only knew how to try to repay through teaching."

After teaching stints at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and Washington University in St. Louis, Boritt joined the MSU faculty in 1975.

The Boritts live in a colonial-style house on Audubon, just south of Audubon Park. The father and two sons, Norse, 8, and Jakob, 3, are a happy, laughing, carefree lot on their three-seat bike — a standard tandem with an improvised seat at the rear for Jake — on pleasant-weather days.

Boritt and Norse ride the bike to classes at Memphis State and Campus School a mile and a half away, drawing doubletakes from motorists along the way.

UPSTAIRS AT home, the professor spends much time in his study, preparing two more books on the Lincoln-Civil War era. He prefers to be with his students, teaching, but keeping up with Lincoln is like "having a bulldog by the tail — you can't let go."

He values the esteem and personal relationship of his students highly. Individuals from his classes are invited to his home during the semester: "It gives me an opportunity to let my students know I have something else I can talk about besides history." And at term's end, it is becoming traditional for the entire class to gather at

Continued

Lincoln

Continued

the Boritt home for a good old nonacademic bash.

A prominent fixture on the wall of his small, upstairs study is a large portrait of Lincoln, a man whose brand of democracy, if not the man himself, was well-known to a lad in Budapest, thanks to his father.

Poul Boritt, now 75, lives in Boston in reasonable content in retirement.

Stroking the Lincoln portrait with affection, Gabor Boritt, his thoughts of two men still blended, says:

"He came to the United States and sold newspapers on the same corner in Boston for many years. He had a doctor's degree in economics, but in this country there was the language barrier. We often asked him to allow us to take care of him so that he could give up the newspapers, but he would not. He considered it genuinely satisfying to stand on the corner with his papers and watch America about him and to swap greetings with it and conduct business with it and be a part of it.

"He never resented not having employment more befitting a man with a doctor of philosophy degree.

"Like Lincoln, he was willing to take whatever God gave."

• • •